LEGISLATION to re-establish a science policy office in the White House, which has long been a goal of the scientific leadership in the United States, has encountered an unexpected roadblock in the Senate. Having swept through the House of Representatives a few weeks ago with scarcely a murmur of dissent, the bill is now stalled in three separate Senate committees chiefly because of growing disagreement about whether or not Congress should specify in detail the office's functions and areas of responsibility.

The essence of the matter is that Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who is the chairman of one of the subcommittees dealing with the bill, believes that the science policy office should play a strong role in military matters as well as domestic science policy affairs, and he wants to write strict provisions into the bill to ensure that is the case. The House-passed version, in contrast, would leave the President virtually sole responsibility for deciding how the office should function and what its areas of responsibility should be. Unless its role is spelled out in some detail, Kennedy is concerned that the office would be an ineffectual junior partner in the White House structure.

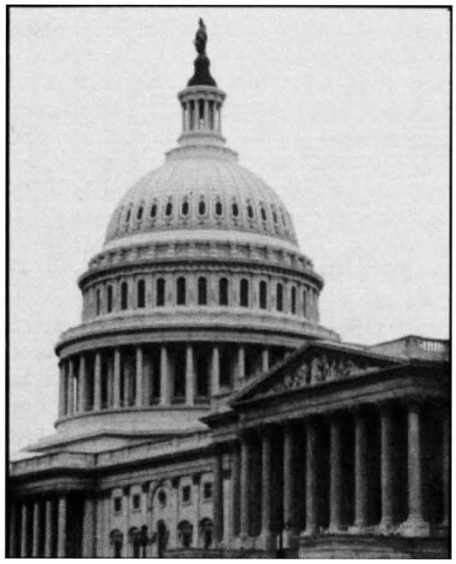
Kennedy's views are said to be shared by Senator John Tunney, who chairs one of the other subcommittees concerned with the legislation and, to a lesser extent, by Senator Frank Moss who chairs the third committee. That is a pretty solid front, and since the matter is very low in the consciousness of most other legislators, there will be little pressure for them to change their minds at least from within Congress.

The White House, however, is opposed to the notion that Congress should write a detailed prescription for an office which will be functioning at the President's elbow, and it strongly favours the House-passed version of the bill. The House members concerned with the matter are also of the opinion that the President should have considerable latitude in deciding how the White House staff should function, and have indicated that they are prepared to stick by their bill. They have argued, for example, that the influence of the science policy office will depend in large measure on whether or not it can function effectively in relation to other White House units and it should therefore be left to establish its own working relationships.

Although it is possible that the senators could compromise, and hammer out a measure acceptable to the White House and the House of Representatives, the prospects at present are uncertain. In any case, the start-up date for the office has receded considerably, and it now seems likely that it will be in place just as the Presidential election is in full swing. With President Ford's chances of re-election uncertain, it would be difficult to recruit good staff to the office, and nothing dramatic could be expected to emerge from it at least until the election is over.

Washington seen

by Colin Norman



● Another contentious issue is about to emerge in the bitter nuclear power struggle in the United States. On January 19, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) will send Congress a report on the feasibility of grouping together nuclear power stations, and perhaps other nuclear facilities, on a few sites instead of scattering them around the country. According to a draft of the report, written by the NRC staff, such nuclear energy centres are deemed both economically advantageous and practical.

The matter is likely to be controversial, however, because such centres would raise some severe environmental problems, although they could help to mitigate some other concerns about nuclear power generation.

The study, which was ordered by Congress when it wrote the bill establishing the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, concludes that nuclear centres, with up to 20 power stations each, could cut the costs of building power plants by about 15%. Since individual plants are expected soon to cost about $1,000 million, such savings would be substantial.

But the environmental problems associated with nuclear energy centres would also be substantial. A 20-unit site, for example, would encompass about 40 square miles, compete for scarce water supplies with other users, such as cities and agriculture, and dispense so much waste heat into the environment that local weather patterns could be affected.

One frequently claimed advantage for grouping power stations, fuel fabrication and reprocessing plants together on the same site is that, when the nuclear industry begins using plutonium as a reactor fuel, having various facilities side-by-side will greatly reduce the risks that atomic bomb ingredients could be stolen in transit. But the study pours some cold water on that idea, suggesting instead that conventional safeguard procedures will be sufficiently effective to take care of the problem.

That particular statement is interesting in light of the fact that NRC has delayed making a decision on whether or not the nuclear industry should be allowed to recycle plutonium as a reactor fuel, precisely because it is not yet convinced that safeguard measures are adequate.

Be that as it may, the study is likely to generate a good deal of debate within Congress this year. It will also rekindle debate at the state level, since several state governments are considering adopting legislation to group power plants together.

● Spurred on by a highly critical report of the Food and Drug Administration's regulation of a ubiquitous food additive, Red Number 2, Senator Gaylord Nelson has proposed legislation which could force several food colourings off the market because of doubts about their safety.

Nelson, a liberal Senator from Wisconsin, who has long been a thorn in FDA's flesh, wants to repeal a provision of the food and drug laws which at present allows scores of food additives to be marketed while FDA collects data on their safety. The provision, which was written into the law in 1960, essentially allowed FDA 30 months to collect test data on additives that were then on the market, and determine whether or not they should be declared safe or banned. Fifteen years later, FDA has still not made up its mind about 90 colouring additives which were being marketed in 1960.

Among those additives is Red Number 2, which in 1973 was consumed at the staggering level of 1.1 million pounds in the United States. For years, there have been conflicting reports of health hazards associated with Red Number 2, including carcinogenicity, teratogenicity, and gonadal atrophy, and a few weeks ago, the Congressional General Accounting Office issued a sharply worded criticism of FDA's delay in deciding whether or not the additive is safe while children consume it in copious quantities in soda pop and candies. Nelson's bill would force FDA to make up its mind about those additives.